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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 002559

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION COALITION MEETS AMBASSADOR, WANTS EARLY ELECTIONS

REF: A. TBILISI 2483

[B](#). TBILISI 2532

[C](#). TBILISI 2030

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) Summary: On October 9, three opposition leaders representing the United National Council of opposition parties (ref A) called on Ambassador to discuss their activities during the current political crisis. The trio presented a letter on behalf of the opposition parties appealing for early Parliamentary elections in April 2008. This is closer to the originally scheduled date for elections, which were constitutionally changed last year to fall of 2008. The representatives stated the common interest of the disparate groups is to ensure free and fair elections in Georgia, to restore trust in the government, and to encourage Georgia's continued Western integration. They said Okruashvili was a political prisoner and criticized the government's handling of the case as the "Russian method." They believe early elections are the best opportunity for Saakashvili to save face, for the country to extricate itself from the current crisis and to meet their common objectives. End Summary.

Political Prisoners and Early Elections

[2](#). (C) David Usupashvili (Republicans), Konstantine Gamsakhurdia (Freedom Party), and Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way) met with Ambassador and Embassy staff on October 9 representing the opposition parties' United National Council. They had also met with European Union ambassadors earlier in the day to deliver their message. The Council was formed following the September 28 protests and these three are designated to speak about the Council's activities. The group said the country is in a "political crisis" following the arrest of former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili. They confirmed they do not deny the GOG's accusations against Okruashvili. However, they deem him a "political prisoner," based on the GOG's management of the case from his arrest to his televised interview and subsequent bail. They also denounced the handling of his confession as the "Russian method" of politics.

[3](#). (C) The representatives claimed that the common interest of the ten disparate parties participating in the Council is to ensure free and fair elections in Georgia, to restore trust in the government, and to ensure Georgia's continued western integration. The Council believes that the ideals of the Rose Revolution have been lost by the current government. They stated that the people do not believe free and fair elections are possible now in the country. They said the GOG has not responded to calls for dialogue with the opposition

(ref B) regarding the situation or the timing of elections, despite their repeated requests. The only response they said they have received is the installation of the new Central Election Commission chairman, Levan Tarkhnishvili, a known government supporter. They called his installation a foregone conclusion and "a farce."

14. (C) The opposition leaders presented a letter from the Council to the Ambassador warning that the dissatisfaction of the people and the government's apparent indifference threatens to hold up Georgia's entry into NATO. The letter advocates holding Parliamentary elections in April 2008, as was planned before constitutional changes last year. Parliament's term was extended and the President's term shortened so that the elections coincide in Fall 2008. The letter contends that this change will defuse the tense political situation and convince NATO states of Georgia's "democratic potential." It also chides some NATO member states for "undue superficiality and forgiveness" in their support of Saakashvili's "irrational policy". The three leaders said that they are approaching all western embassies to submit their call for early elections. They believe that early elections are the only guarantor of restoring the people's trust in government and that if the protests and unrest continue until elections in October 2008, "we can not say who will control the street or what it will do."

15. (C) Gamsakhurdia said the opposition does not want to destabilize the situation, but that conditions are becoming unbearable for people. He said under the proposed election code (ref C), and without USG intervention in favor of further reform, neither fair elections nor dialogue with the ruling party is possible. Zourabichvili added that one-half of Georgia already believes that the USG is "pulling the strings of the government." (The Ambassador said this simply

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is not true.) Usupashvili reiterated that the council is concerned about the future of government, and that many of Saakashvili's changes further strengthened his power rather than helping the country at large (including consolidating TV broadcasting, selling state assets, and monopolizing the Central Election Commission.)

16. (C) The group stated that the opposition is in a dilemma. They must tell the truth to the people, but their criticism looks bad outside of Georgia. They said it shows a divided country, which makes European nations nervous. Furthermore, the lack of internal cooperation makes it difficult for the international community to believe that such a divided country could resolve the conflict areas.

Ambassador and MAP

17. (C) The Ambassador agreed that it is a "political crisis" and that a strong, effective opposition is necessary. He asked how moving the election to April would benefit the country and not just give the opposition leverage over the government. He also asked if the opposition had any alternatives to the existing majoritarian system that would make the elections more representative. Usupashvili proposed creating smaller electoral districts that would directly elect their representatives. Finally, the Ambassador asked how many seats the opposition thought it could win in an alternative system. Usupashvili and Gamsakhurdia said that in a 50-plus-one mandate district, the opposition would take a minimum of one-half the 50 majoritarian seats, perhaps more. The Ambassador also expressed concern over the shrillness and the usefulness of the rhetoric employed by both sides in the current situation. The opposition leaders agreed the rhetoric has gotten quite strident in the current tense situation, and that it may be threatening their unanimous goal of MAP in NATO. However, Usupashvili said "if we don't speak out about the government, then who will?"

Should we keep quiet to obtain MAP if the National Movement then takes over the entire government?" Zurabichvili was of the opinion that MAP at the Bucharest Summit is a lost cause anyway, and therefore the rough and tumble rhetoric of an election campaign in the Spring will have no impact on Georgia's NATO chances.

Comment

19. (C) Early elections would definitely give the opposition a boost, but they are unlikely to bring them to power in any case. The oppositionists were at pains to demonstrate a common front and did not seem perturbed over the negative impact of their rhetoric. The three leaders are long-time fixtures on Georgia's political scene, and Usupashvili was one of the leaders of the Rose Revolution. However, none of them has demonstrated over the past two years the ability on their own to galvanize and lead the Georgian public. Polls show only Irakli Okruashvili had that potential. The opposition Council said it still plans to hold a nationwide protest on November 2. The Council's ability to bring people onto the street in support, now that Okruashvili has been discredited, will be a test of their movement's staying power.
TEFFT